

Challenges are Opportunities for Future of our Church

Dear People of the Archdiocese of Baltimore,

The issue of a shortage of priests has always been with our Church. Whether in the early days of the newly reated Diocese of Baltimore or when European immigration was at its zenith, bishops have always contended with the issue of having enough priests to serve the spiritual needs of the people.

More recently, people in our Church at every level have been conscious of the ever-advancing crush of priestly retirements and the equally critical shortage of newly ordained priests. For years this was seen as a problem “on the horizon,” to be dealt with “down the road.”

As Archbishop of Baltimore, the bell was rung on this issue for me during a passionate and spontaneous discussion at last September’s Priests Convocation. Conversations about projected numbers of priests, retirements and the need to further engage the laity in the ministry of the Church yielded to broader and more lively discussions about Mass schedules, regional approaches to ministry and more dynamic liturgies and parishes.

A great sense of urgency animated the 125 priests in attendance and we left the Convocation united in our belief that we must meet this challenge head-on. For me, just seven months removed from the pain of consolidating 13 of our schools, I left with the grim realization that this was not an issue to be left for my successor.

Four months later, in January 2011, I, along with the members of the Presbyteral Council, was presented with a report by the Priest Personnel Board titled, “Report of the Committee on Priest Personnel Policy Planning.” I did not commission this report. Rather, it came as a true grassroots initiative of the Priest Personnel Board and was offered as a possible roadmap for addressing aspects of the upcoming “clergy shortage,” changes in parish demographics and many related challenges that had been discussed the previous September.

The report was the work of a Personnel Board Committee of six priests and two sub-committees of six other priests. It was the result of the collection and analysis of data, followed by meetings that took place over six months during which the members “deliberated at length on the implications of the data, and crafted to the best of its collective ability responses to the challenges thereby presented.”

Following the January Presbyteral Council meeting, I wrote to our priests asking that the plan be discussed at region meetings so that the input of all the priests could be shared at the March Presbyteral Council meeting. I also solicited direct input from priests and parish leaders.

My letter (to priests of the Archdiocese) of March 18 provided my impressions of that most recent Presbyteral Council discussion. Since then, I have had time to further ponder the report, as well as to consider all the comments I personally received to both the report and my letter. These include comments offered via the January and March Presbyteral Council meetings, regional priest meetings, and numerous personal conversations and written correspondences.

As a result, I have formulated a vision for what should be included in any process we undertake to achieve our goals. Thus, I offer these observations for our Archdiocese as we prepare to move forward together in this critical and exciting next chapter of our history:

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